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Walter H. Johnson  
*Cumberland County College*

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Walter H. Johnson

## Robert McCloskey's Centennial Celebration: A Fitting Tribute

Many American people know the name Robert McCloskey, and even more know the famous books he has produced. Because of his contribution to the world of children, his memory was honored on September 13, 2014—one hundred years after his birth. The town of Hamilton, Ohio, where he was born, was the location of this celebration, specifically the Wilks Conference Center on the campus of Miami University.

This honor paid to McCloskey is especially noteworthy because of the impact his stories and their illustrations have made and are still making on children and teachers of children. Young readers and listeners love the topics he has chosen for his stories. With the text of these books, teachers of the early grades can make a meaningful impression on children's listening skills. For example, kindergarten and first-graders can be told to merely listen while the details in *Time of Wonder* are read aloud. The warmth and mystery of early morning fog is accompanied by quiet and poetic diction, and this gradually changes to short, jerky sentences to prepare the reader or listener for the approaching storm. Here the illustrations also change from the soft gray and green watercolors to colors and angles that depict the sharp, choppy waves and the pelting rain. Children of some higher grades can be taught to appreciate the artwork—how his clever use of watercolors can create vitality and movement.

And this is true of all his books: he chooses the medium for his illustrations to add to the overall impression. In *Time of Wonder* it was watercolors that enabled him to create the varying moods. But his earlier outstanding book, *Make Way for Ducklings*, was done by using stone lithography—a truly remarkable medium, which, in itself, deserves consideration. This is a very old method involving drawing directly on stone. The artist uses a grease pencil or crayon on the surface of a stone slab; when ink is placed on the stone, it adheres only to the greased area. (All the Currier and Ives prints were made in this way.) The subtle grain of the stone is visible in each illustration, and this in itself helps to create a

mood. Though outmoded today, stone lithography was a perfect choice. A perusal of *Make Way for Ducklings* can show how the graininess and its sepia colors help to realistically capture the mallards in their various poses.

McCloskey had been honored on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday, and he himself was the guest speaker then. Since he died in 2003, the key personnel who honored him in 2014 included his two daughters (Sally and Jane), Nancy Schön (a highly respected sculptor), and Peter Roop (who summers in Maine near McCloskey's island and has written over fifty children's books).

Nancy is the creator in 1987 of "Mrs. Mallard and Her Ducklings" that grace the Boston Public Garden. Forty-six years earlier, McCloskey published the book that introduced this duck family—the previously mentioned *Make Way for Ducklings*. This book won the coveted Caldecott Award in 1942 and is still in print. In 1991 First Lady Barbara Bush gave a reproduction of the sculpted ducks to Raisa Gorbachev, wife of the Russian leader. The ducks and their story contributed to the peace process between the two nations, and McCloskey and the sculptor accompanied the Bushes to the Soviet Union for the Duck installation in Novodevichy Park, Moscow, set on old cobblestones like the ones in Boston.

Though immensely talented as an illustrator, McCloskey produced just eight children's books of his own. The first, *Lentil*, preceded *Ducklings* by a year. The drawings are taken from McCloskey's memories of Hamilton, Ohio. Though not an award winner, this book is still popular, especially in McCloskey's birth place. In 1999 the Executive Director of the Hamilton Community Foundation approached Nancy Schön, asking if she would make a reproduction of the Boston duck family to honor McCloskey in his home town. The shy, humble author-illustrator turned down Nancy's request, claiming the story took place in Boston. An alternative suggestion was to sculpt the character Lentil, with a harmonica at his mouth and his dog following him. This idea gained the author's approval,

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however reluctantly, and the finished product was installed and dedicated in September 2001 in a place called Lentil Park. (McCloskey had rejected the idea that the park be named after him.)

McCloskey's third book, *Homer Price*, was also inspired by his small-town Hamilton years. This "chapter book" presents six extravagant yarns about life in the town of Centerburg. Books of humor like this do not need any justification other than the pure enjoyment they bring to the reader. Included here is the story of a donut machine that gets out of control. A friend who admired McCloskey's work was Morton Schindel, who established the Weston Woods Studio for filming children's books. Schindel's initial approach to filming was to use the iconographic method, whereby the camera would pan the book's illustrations to simulate movement while a voice read the story with musical sound effects in the background. Schindel used this method on most of McCloskey's books, but because *Homer Price* had few illustrations, he took the donut machine episode from the book and created a live-action movie. McCloskey himself was one of the actors and was rewarded with one of the machines used in the film. Sound films like the story of the donut machine can enrich a child's experiences with the book. More noteworthy is the fact that this book can serve as a "stepping stone" to a classic like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, for some preparation is often needed when presenting classics to children.

Another episode from *Homer Price* is the story of four robbers. McCloskey finished this book before enlisting in World War II, and while he was at an army base in Alabama, the Viking Press asked him for another illustration to accompany this story. The artist obliged by sending a drawing of five robbers in a bed, having forgotten that he had stipulated just four in the storyline. Children still recognize this classic "blunder"—obviously overlooked by his editor, as well.

McCloskey was also a participant in another live-action film by Morton Schindel called "The Lively Art of Picture Books"—a very popular sixteen-millimeter film that libraries throughout the country lent to thousands of classrooms. John Langstaff was the emcee who introduced three of the most successful children's book illustrators to the viewing public. McCloskey was filmed on the island in Maine

where he spent the summers of his artistic career. During his segment he told of how he had kept live ducks in the New York apartment he shared with fellow-illustrator Marc Simont. He claimed that he was able to calm the ducks by feeding them wine so he could easily sketch them in their various poses. This highly interesting classroom film is especially useful in Children's Literature and Library Science classes. But teachers of early grades can explain how McCloskey spent countless painstaking hours drawing sketches of duck movements and make this book interesting and even more exciting to the young students. (The other two illustrators featured in this film were Maurice Sendak and Barbara Cooney. This hour-long film ends with a reading and the iconographic depiction of the entire story *Time of Wonder*.)

A gap of five years occurred before McCloskey's fourth book, *Blueberries for Sal*, was published. The "Sal" in this story was his own daughter. A segment of the "plot" in this book tells of Sal's encounter with a bear cub. This book has a special appeal to the youngest of children, for they can appreciate the human expressions of surprise, fear, and consternation on the faces of Sal, the bear cub, and their respective mothers. Moreover, the horizontal shape of this book allows for realistic pictures of the sloping hills seen throughout the story. This capability of McCloskey to appeal visually is a trademark of the author-illustrator, something that can have a lasting effect on would-be artists among children readers or observers. This title won for its author a Caldecott Honor Award, and gave the sculptor Nancy Schön another opportunity to honor her favorite illustrator just a few years ago when she created a statue of the bear cub. It stands in the Maine Coastal Botanical Gardens in Boothbay, Maine.

*Centerburg Tales* came next and was followed by *One Morning in Maine*, which garnered this illustrator another Caldecott Honor Award. There is a subtlety in this book rarely seen in books for young children: McCloskey gives a beautiful example of a child (once again named "Sal") attempting to "conceptualize" the presence or absence of teeth, after having lost a tooth of her own. She assimilates what she sees, hears, and feels as she accepts the physical changes in herself and the differences in others.

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In 1957 his book *Time of Wonder* was named a Caldecott winner; McCloskey became the first illustrator to win this award twice. (Prior to completing this work, he illustrated a book written by his mother-in-law, Ruth Sawyer, entitled *Journey Cake, Ho!*, and this won for him a third Caldecott Honor Award.)

McCloskey stopped illustrating in 1963 after completing *Burt Dow: Deep Water Man*—a tall tale filled with the humor that kids can readily appreciate. After that, he spent years creating mechanical puppets. This was a labor of love for him although he was never able to market his plan. This kept him happily occupied, however, until illness forced him into a nursing home. Meanwhile, he was awarded Doctor of Letters degrees from Miami University (Ohio) and Mount

Holyoke. In 1973 the Catholic Library Association presented him the prestigious Regina Medal for “distinguished contribution to children’s literature.” Then, in 2000, he won the Library of Congress Living Legend Award.

Rightfully honored on the one-hundredth anniversary of his birth, Robert McCloskey and his work will undoubtedly be appreciated for years and years to come. Students who study Children’s Literature can take from McCloskey the best of story and drawings, using them as a touchstone for evaluating other authors and illustrators. He was not prolific in his submissions, and so the very topics he picked, along with the precision of language and the capability of his illustrations to add to the storyline, make him an ideal contributor to the art and text of children’s books.

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**Walter H. Johnson** is a retired Associate Professor at Cumberland County College in Vineland, NJ, where he taught various courses in the Humanities Department, including Theatre Appreciation, Modern American Literature, and Children’s Literature. He considers himself privileged to have had articles published in most of the editions of *The New Jersey English Journal* since its inception in 1987.

